

The lifecycle of Sri Lanka Malay

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The aim of this paper is to document the forces that led first to the decay and then the revival of the ancestral language of the Malay diaspora of Sri Lanka. We first sketch the background of the origins of the language in terms of intense contact and multilingual transfer; then analyze the forces that led to a significant language shift and consequent loss, as well as the factors responsible for the recent survival of the language. In doing so we focus in particular on the ideologies of language upheld within the community, as well as on the role of external agents in the lifecycle of the community.

1. THE FORMATIVE PERIOD. The community of Malays in Sri Lanka¹ is the result of the central practices of Western colonialism, namely the displacement of subjects from one colonized region to another. Through various waves of deportation communities of people from Indonesia (the

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Dutch East Indies) and Malaysia were settled on the island. It is possible that the community based in the Slave Island district in Colombo may have been there during Portuguese rule (until 1656), but the bulk of the Sri Lanka Malays trace their ancestry to the communities brought over during Dutch rule (1656-1796) and during British rule (1796-1948) (Hussainmiya 1987).

1.1. THE PEOPLE. While referred to homogeneously as ‘Sri Lanka Malays’, their origins are in fact very heterogeneous, covering an area from Malaysia to the easternmost provinces of Indonesia (Hussainmiya 1987, 1990). Naturally, their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are similarly extremely diverse. Under the Dutch, political exiles, as well as convicts, were deported to Ceylon from different corners of the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, including Java, the Maluku and Goa, among other places. The largest group of people attributed a ‘Malay’ origin came as soldiers also from disparate places such as Bali, Java, Riau, Ambon and peninsular Malaysia. As recorded in Hussainmiya (1987: 48), “almost all the major ethnic groups from the region of the Eastern archipelago were represented”. In fact, these peoples have been known as *Ja Minissu* by the Sinhalese and *Java Manussar* by the Tamils: ‘people from Java’ (Saldin 2003: 3). It was the British who, upon finding a community who spoke ‘Malay’, attached the corresponding ethnic label to the group, and it is this designation ‘Malay’ that has persisted.

Historical records lead us to postulate at least three different communities in the early days of the diaspora. First, there was a rather sophisticated diaspora of noblemen – nobility exiled during Dutch occupation of the East Indies – who typically would be deported together with their families. As mentioned above, political dissenters were also deported. Second was a large contingent of soldiers imported first by the

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Dutch to form a ‘Malay’ garrison to fight against native rulers. This would become the Ceylon Rifle Regiment under the British who continued the same practice (cf. Ricklefs 1974). The soldiers were often accompanied by their wives, a practice encouraged during Dutch and British rule (Sourjah 2003; Ansaldo 2008, 2009). A third group comprising convicts, slaves and indentured laborers was also present probably from as early as Portuguese occupation, and such importation surely existed through both Dutch and British rule. This last group would also have been rather heterogeneous ethnically and linguistically but historical records do not provide us with any detail about size or specific provenance (Hussainmiya 1990; Ansaldo 2008, 2009). Contacts between the groups were indeed quite frequent, due among other reasons to the practice of employing noblemen as officers of the troops, master-servant relations and a common, Islamic faith (Hussainmiya 1987, 1990). Overall, it can be seen that the community of Malays in Sri Lanka consisted of not just single individuals but also family, retinue, and network ties, which settled in the community.

1.2. THE VERNACULAR. The formation of the vernacular known as Sri Lanka Malay (SLM) has been described as the outcome of language contact between early Malay varieties, including vernaculars and lingua francas, brought over from the Indonesian archipelago, with local languages, in particular Sinhala and Lankan Tamil, the dominant languages of Sri Lanka. It is widely known that a lingua franca generally referred to as Bazaar Malay functioned as a wide-spread language of intercultural communication throughout the Indonesian and Malay world (Adelaar 1996; Wurm et al. 1995). It is such a language that would have allowed the early Malay settlers to communicate across their vernacular varieties as diverse as Javanese, Balinese, Ambonese, etc.

Ansaldo (2009, 2011) captures the process of language creation as one of metatypy (see also Bakker 2006; Nordhoff 2009) leading to a hybrid profile of Lankan grammar and Malay-derived lexicon. The most obvious illustration of metatypy in SLM is to be found in the nominal domain, in particular the case system (see Table 1). The emblematic language, a Malay variety variously referred to as Bazaar, Trade or Vehicular – a Pidgin-derived Malay (PDM) variety following the typology of contact Malay varieties put forward in Adelaar (1996, 2005) – has, in line with other Austronesian

languages, no morphological marking of case on the Noun. The dominant languages in the multilingual ecology in which SLM evolves, Sinhala and Lankan Tamil, both show typical case systems of the South Asian type. Due to the known congruence between these two languages, there is a certain degree of functional overlap in the two systems (Ansaldo 2009, 2011). What is crucial here is that SLM shows systematic restructuring of its NP to map the case systems of Lankan type, as shown in Table 1 below (synthesized from Ansaldo 2009: 129– 131)

CASE	FUNCTION(S)		
	Sri Lanka Malay	Sinhala	Tamil
Dative	Exp, G, Ben, Poss	Exp, G, Ben, Poss	Exp, G, Ben, Poss
Nominative	Agent	Agent	Agent
Accusative	Patient	Patient	Patient
Genitive	Possession	Temp.poss, Loc	Temp.poss, Loc
Instrumental	Instr. Source	Instr. Source	Instr.
Comitative	Association	Association	Association

TABLE 1: Case in Sri Lankan Malay, Sinhala and Lankan Tamil

Notes on abbreviations: Experiential (Exp), Goal (G), Benefactive (Ben), Possessive (Poss), Temporary possession (Temp. poss), Locative (Loc), Instrumental (Instr)

Worth noting for our purposes here are the following points:

- The overwhelming typological restructuring that leads an original Malay variety without morphological case marking (typical for Malayic in general) to develop a case system of the South Asian type, with a dominant, multifunctional and obligatory Dative case, and a weak Accusative case mostly used to mark definite objects (Ansaldo 2008, 2009);
- The structural overlap in all three languages in the three core cases Dative, Nominative and Accusative;
- The particular structural parallel in the SLM and Sinhala Instrumental-Ablative syncretism;

- The reanalysis of PDM lexical items (PDMLex) into case markers (Ansaldo 2009: 129).

This overwhelming typological restructuring has been explained through the typological pressure that Sinhala and Tamil combined exercise over the emblematic original Malay variety, in a typical metatypic scenario. This can be observed in particular in three noteworthy syntactic-semantic alignments happening here in the emblematic language (Ansaldo 2011):

- (a) General VO > OV shift; from Austronesian to Lankan word-order;
- (b) Following (a) the grammaticalization of [PDMLex + N] into [N-Case Marker];
- (c) In parallel with (b) the semantic obligation to express (core) cases.

The following examples (adapted from Nordhoff 2009: 483) illustrate the features listed in (a) to (c):

- (1) *Go=dang karang bannyak thàràsìggar*
I=DAT now very sick
'I am very sick now'
- (2) *Titanic kappal=yang su-thìnggalam*
T ship=ACC PAST-sink
'The ship Titanic sank'
- (3) *Police=dering su-dhaatang*
Police=INSTR PAST-come
'The police came'

Ansaldo (2009: 129) suggests the following possible etymologies for the case markers above, though these remain speculative:

- DAT *nang* from Malay *nang* 'towards';
- ACC *yang* from Malay *-nya*, a definiteness marker;
- INSTR/ABL *dering* (often reduced to *ring*) from Jakarta *bikin* 'to make'.

It must be pointed out that this is a rather radical restructuring for a

number of reasons (Ansaldo 2009):

- What we see is a case of development of morphology, i.e. an increase in morphological complexity not usually associated with contact-induced change (Bakker 2006; Ansaldo & Nordhoff 2009);
- The development of case systems is normally a complex gradual process that requires many generations of speakers.

Such radical restructuring leads us to believe that an overwhelming typological pressure must lie behind the changes, which could be explained by a scenario in which acquisition takes place in a trilingual environment in which Malay, Sinhala, and Tamil compete. Nordhoff (2013) offers a historical account of the formation of SLM in which five different phases of formation are postulated, summarized below. As we can see he suggests that the restructuring described above would have occurred in the middle phase of the development of SLM:

1. Dialect leveling, in which different varieties of Malay emerge as a more homogeneous variety;
2. Substrate reinforcement, during which Malay features that are present in one of the adstrates, Sinhala or Tamil, are retained;
3. Where the problem lies: ‘creolization’ or metatypy? Nordhoff’s answer is metatypy, which according to him hold along the lines laid out in Ansaldo (2008, 2009): typological convergence led by frequency effects;
4. Shift² to Sinhala/ attrition: increased bilingualism in Sinhala leads to shift towards the dominant language;
5. Independent (recent/ new) developments (i.e. not contact-induced).

Point 3 is particularly important because it makes reference to a debate initiated by the work of Smith et al. (see 2004): these authors suggest that SLM may be the product of a creole-like scenario in which Tamil-Malay language contact led to a restructuring process. However extensive work by Nordhoff (2009) has shown that there is substantial Sinhalese influence

²Nordhoff uses ‘convergence’ but he really seems to mean shift.

in SLM grammar, requiring an explanation that considers the role of this language in the formation of SLM. In addition, historical work by Ansaldo (2009) has shown the lack of historical evidence behind the claim of strong Tamil influence in the evolution of the SLM community. Most recently Bakker (2013) provides genetic evidence against the claim of significant Tamil influence.

It should also be noted that, in addition to SLM, another crucial feature of the linguistic repertoire of the Malays in Sri Lanka that is particularly significant is their multilingualism (Lim & Ansaldo 2007): the Malay community has always been perhaps the most multilingual of all the co-existing Sri Lankan communities – Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers – having in their repertoire the main languages spoken on the island, namely Sinhala and Tamil, alongside SLM, and in some strata, also that of their colonisers. The community in contemporary times is still clearly multilingual. This view is not uncontroversial: in particular Bakker (2013) suggests that multilingualism might not have been widespread in the past. More importantly Rassool (2013) questions the extent to which such multilingualism may be relevant for identity construction in the SLM community. Her findings suggest that SLM community members do attach high value to the SLM vernacular. We fully agree with this view which, crucially, is not incompatible with the observation that much of the SLM community is rather multilingual. In the most recent census (Department of Census and Statistics 2012), a significantly higher proportion of Malays report an ability to speak, and to read and write (49.7% and 61.2%) the three major languages Sinhala, Tamil and English, compared to the other ethnic groups (Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor and Burgher) who have proportions no higher than about 12%, apart from the Burghers (20% and 12.4%) and the Sri Lanka Moors (26.7% and 28%), which are still significantly lower than the Malays. This is corroborated in a survey of the Malay community in the capital Colombo (Lim & Ansaldo 2006a), in which some two-thirds speak at least four languages – SLM, English, Sinhala and Tamil – with the remainder merely having Tamil absent from this multilingual repertoire (also see Table 2).

1.3. THE PROCESS. In many multilingual communities around the world, where multilingualism is not institutionally supported through schools,

education, and other institutions, multilingual individuals may experience shifts within their multilingual competence. For example, if one of the codes used becomes limited to the home domain, it typically grows weak, and interference from the more frequently used languages is expected. This essentially is language attrition which results from processes of shift and partial maintenance, as discussed in Thomason & Kaufman (1988):

- There is gradual abandonment of ancestral language (AL). This is typical for minority groups under (a) colonization and (b) nation-expansion processes and it is usually associated with stigmatized linguistic codes;
- The actual loss happens in the transition from monolingualism in AL to multilingualisms in L2/L3 as L2/L3 take over domains of usage;
- The number of AL speakers gradually decreases and so does competence in AL, but if AL has vitality, some features survive; if not, death occurs.

In the transition process described above, L2/3 dominant individuals are responsible for the transfer of L2/3 features into AL. These individuals lead the change through intense code-mixing, during which structural and lexical transfer from the dominant languages interferes with features from the eroding code.

2. THE MODERN ERA

2.1. THE COMMUNITY. Census data show that, from the late 1800s to the beginning of the third millennium, the Malays have consistently comprised approximately 0.3% of the population. They are still today a numerical minority in Sri Lanka, with the majority Sinhalese comprising two-thirds to three-quarters of the population, and a significant minority of Tamils comprising a quarter of the population.³ They can also, and perhaps more markedly, be seen to constitute a minority in name: in the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, they have been grouped together with the Sri Lankan Moors (Tamil-speaking people tracing their ancestry to Arab traders who arrived

³Population censuses provide the following data (selected): in 1881: Sinhalese 66.7%, Tamil 25%; in 1953: Sinhalese 70%, Tamil 23%; in 2001: Sinhalese 80%, Tamil 9% (but this excludes *Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam* areas); in all censuses, up until 2001, Malays are a constant 0.3%.

in Sri Lanka between the 8th and 15th centuries) and Indian Moors (from India) as ‘Moors’ (Official Website of the Government of Sri Lanka) or ‘Muslims’ (Sri Lanka Government Web Portal), or presented together as “Moors, Malays, Burghers (of Portuguese & Dutch descent) and others” (Government of Sri Lanka 2014),⁴ and have not had a distinct identity as ‘Malays’ at this official level, though a distinct SLM identity is clearly perceived at the inter- and intra-communal level. They therefore possess relatively low symbolic capital within their own country, and the level of ethnolinguistic vitality from the objective criterion of institutional support (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977) can be assessed as low.

Their status within the country nonetheless seems to have always been quite high. As outlined above, a majority of the ancestors of the Colombo, Kandy and Hambantota communities would have been Javanese nobility exiled during the wars of succession in Java during Dutch rule. Official documents of 1792, for example, list 176 individuals belonging to 23 families of royalty and nobility exiled together with their families from Java, Batavia and Sumatra to Ceylon (Burah 2006: 44). The older Javanese, because of their proficiency in Dutch, were appointed *Hoofd de Maha Badda* (Sinhala *maha badda* ‘great trade’, referring to the cinnamon industry first established by the Sinhala king in the 1500s for Portuguese trade) or *Hoofd de Cinnamon*, namely, the ‘captain’ supervising the cinnamon gardens, the spice being one of the most precious commodities during Dutch rule (Burah 2006: 39-42f.); with increased production of cinnamon, these superior officers would be rewarded with more power, promotions and privileges (Burah 2006: 59). Most of the exiles became enlisted in the military, and were later retained under the British as members of the Malay Regiment where, although they dropped their royal titles, they did nonetheless maintain their status (Burah 2006: 46-47). After the disbandment of the regiment in 1873, many of these joined the tea estates and functioned as intermediaries between the English superintendents and the Indian labor force (Saldin 2003: 10). In short, although officially symbolic recognition would appear to be low, the Malays have held a status amongst the communities that has been high, in no small part due to their origins and their multilingual linguistic abilities.

⁴In censuses, though, Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor, Burgher, Malay, and Other are separate ethnicity categories.

COMMUNITY	CHARACTERISTICS
Colombo	Middle-upper class community in capital city; restricted usage of SLM in old-middle generations now under revitalization efforts; common Sinhala (and some Tamil) competence; English fairly fluent to native speaker competence; no SLM in younger generation
Slave Island	Lower class community in a poor district of Colombo; wide-spread SLM usage; strong Tamil influences; no English
Kandy & other Upcountry	Middle-lower class communities in the central hill country area; SLM in old-middle generations, and in some younger generation; Sinhala and Tamil competence; some English proficiency.
Hambantota	Community on the south coast, traditionally heavy Sinhalese-speaking area; SLM in old-middle generations; often trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil; limited English
Kirinda	Fishing community on southeast coast; SLM dominant in all generations; fully trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil, especially in middle-younger generations; English limited to a few individuals

TABLE 2: Sri Lanka Malay communities and vitality

It is consequently not surprising that – in spite of their lack of identity in the Ceylon Citizenship Act – the Sri Lanka Malays’ own identity has always been vibrant. The Malays are found in various communities located around the island, who vary in their socioeconomic and educational status, their linguistic repertoire and communicative practices, and whose SLM varieties show some variation, as summarized in Table 2 (Lim & Ansaldo 2006b, 2007; Ansaldo 2008). While there is a strong sense of identity and separateness for each of the different communities (SLM community p.c. 2003-2006), they nonetheless all identify themselves as Sri Lankan Malays. This has surely been the case since colonial rule where this ‘Malay’

diaspora is testified to being a close-knit community, in which contacts between the different Malay/Indonesian ethnicities as well as the different social extractions were maintained through the ranks of the army as well as through common religious practice (Ricklefs 1974). There is also much awareness and expression of their culture and ancestry (e.g. Saldin 2003; Burah 2006), and there are a large number of social and cultural groups, including, for example, the Sri Lanka Malay Confederation (SLAMAC) (the umbrella organization), the Sri Lanka Malay Rupee Fund, the Conference of Sri Lanka Malays (COSLAM), and Malay Associations of the communities located around the island, which are all extremely active in the organization of regular social, cultural, commemorative and fund-raising activities and initiatives (Ansaldo & Lim field notes 2003-2007). Given their dense and multiplex networks, it is not surprising that SLM has been widely spoken as a home language for generations (Hussainmiya 1987).

2.2. IDEOLOGY. It is quite possible that, until the advent of early linguists visiting Sri Lanka in the second half of the 20th century, there was little awareness of the differences between the ancestral language and Standard Malay. Let us not forget that, apart from SLM, the communities have been inherently multilingual, mixing Sinhala, Tamil as well as colonial varieties (Lim & Ansaldo 2007). As a consequence of the religious narrative and the mistaken identification with Tamil Muslims, early attempts at description place SLM as a mixed language of Tamil and Malay descent. As revealed in the first phases of our documentation process, this label carried negative stigma and can be directly related to a certain loss of prestige of SLM from this moment on. The mistaken interpretation of SLM communities as Tamil-Malay ‘hybrid’, has led to the infelicitous classification of Sri Lanka Malay as a ‘creole’: it is referred to as a creole in an early account by a historian (Hussainmiya 1987), by linguists (see e.g. Smith, Paauw & Hussainmiya 2004), and it is listed as Sri Lankan Creole Malay in *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005; Lewis et al. 2013). As noted in Garrett (2006: 180f.), and as has been shown in the case of SLM (Ansaldo & Lim 2006; Lim & Ansaldo 2006b, 2007), such a classification, besides being defective on historical as well as theoretical grounds (Aboh & Ansaldo 2007; Ansaldo & Matthews 2007), in fact has a significant impact on the type of shift that may occur as well as its speed: the awareness of speaking a ‘corrupt’ or ‘broken’ variety, as is often

implied in the current definition of creole languages, may lead to a perception of their linguistic variety as not being ‘good’ enough to maintain, and further strengthens a community’s desire to move away to a more standard variety (see also Rassool 2013). Indeed, it has been argued that contact languages are particularly endangered, given their marginalization amongst languages in general and endangered languages in particular (Garrett 2006: 178).⁵ This first phase would be responsible for the rise of forces advocating a shift to Standard Malay in the community.

As mentioned above, one reaction to a stigmatization of the ancestral language came in the form of appeals to introduce the Standard Malay variety of Malaysia into Sri Lanka. This made particular good sense in the urban community of Colombo where younger generations had already completely lost competence in SLM, and where exposure to global Malay institutions such as the Malay High Commission made this option viable. However this idea was based on a very limited understanding of the extreme differences between these two varieties. Recall that, while SLM is a radical restructured variety that has undergone metatypic changes (see Ross 1996) that render it grammatically closer to Sinhala than to any Austronesian language, the early Malays would have been speakers of the Malay lingua franca that existed since the 1st millennium AD in the monsoon Asia region, most often referred to as Bazaar Malay (Adelaar & Prentice 1996). SLM is mutually unintelligible with any colloquial Malay variety we know of; they can therefore be considered different languages. Nonetheless attempting to shift towards the standard language of Malaysia made excellent sense in terms of linguistic capital. It would allow the community to move from a stigmatized creole variety to a prestigious national and global language symbolizing modernity as well as a strong Islamic identity.

When we entered the picture in 2004 as a DoBeS team aiming for a thorough documentation of SLM language and culture, a number of things changed. Documentation brought recognition to SLM as a variety with scientific capital and thus the bias towards its creole or mixed nature was partly reversed. It became also obvious over time that acquiring Standard Malay was not the same as revitalizing SLM, and eventually the latter became a priority in the community and affected the appeal of

⁵ In spite of this, our project documenting SLM was, in 2004, the first DoBeS project documenting a ‘creole’.

the former. As a consequence of the documentation project, SLM gained attention in the international community, and a number of publications reached the community, strengthening the perception that SLM was a unique identity separate from Malaysia and Indonesia and unlike any other within Sri Lanka. The unprecedented attention that SLM is receiving now, not only from Western intellectual powerhouses, but crucially from local linguistic institutions, further strengthens the renewed prestige of an SLM identity centered in, but not exclusively limited to, its ancestral language. Where previously, cultural associations in Colombo such as COSLAM communicated in English, they now make a point of holding their meetings in SLM. Through a reevaluation of their linguistic capital, SLM communities are now focusing a lot of energy on maintenance and revitalization of the ancestral language.

2.3. IDENTITY. In addition to a revitalized ideology of its own language, SLM identity is strengthened by vibrant historical and religious narratives as described below.

To start with, it is possible to entertain the theory that, in the 7th century AD, a powerful trading network of the Indonesian archipelago started extending its reach to the South Asian subcontinent. Known as the Srivijaya culture, these traders sailed to Tamil Nadu as well as Sri Lanka probably on their way to the Arabian Peninsula, and established regular trading hamlets in this part of the Indian Ocean and the Arab Sea (see Ansaldo 2009). While there is no solid historical or archeological evidence for this so far, this narrative is present among members of the SLM community and underlies their identification with an era that pre-dates Western colonial expansion and carries an aura of prestige and power. Until the advent of the Chola dynasty in South India (9th century AD), Srivijaya fleets commanded much respect in the region, and thus constitute a powerful association for the purpose of a 'Malay' identity in Sri Lanka. Though it is difficult to prove whether Hambantota was really founded by Indonesian and Malay traders, as some community members believe, the quasi-mythical association plays a role in local writings and narrative in SLM origins and identity.

Secondly, during British colonial rule a regiment of soldiers of Malay and Indonesian provenance had established itself as a significant power to keep order among local Lankan ethnicities. The Ceylon Rifle Regiment

(Hussainmiya 1990) was a prestigious institution that could lead to attractive careers after service; indeed many former soldiers ended up as police officers, plantation overseers and other official positions under British rule. Association with the history of the Regiment is important in SLM historiography as it portrays the Malays as the chosen group in colonial Sri Lanka, above the local majority of Sinhalese and the significant minority of Lankan Tamils. Already during Dutch rule a practice of bringing over fighters from the Indonesian and Malay colonies had resulted in the Malays being regarded as fierce and dependable soldiers, qualities that are still glorified in local historiography of the SLM community. When we trace the origins of SLM families, it is clear that the fact that the Malays were not natural allies of Lankan ethnic groups, and that they were in possession of a multilingual repertoire, together made them the natural, chosen intermediaries between colonizers and locals in both Dutch and British Sri Lanka (Ansaldo 2009).

Finally, it is crucial to realize that SLMs are Muslim. This is a strong centripetal force within the community island-wide that clearly sets them apart from all other groups with the exception of the Moors.⁶ It is clear that religious affiliation has been a strong factor in maintaining a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. A weekly prayer in SLM is still being offered at the Slave Island Mosque.

3. FINAL REMARKS. Ansaldo (2011) presents the cultural process that contributes to the emergence of a unique SLM identity as a matter of alignment. Identity alignment refers to language shift and linguistic restructuring observed in many multilingual diasporic minorities caught in the crossfire of two, opposed trends: (i) convergence to the dominant culture(s) and (ii) preservation of unique own identity. It is within such a conceptual framework that the process of creation of a new grammar such as SLM can be understood.

While studies of SLM so far have mostly focused on the internal forces that drive the linguistic dynamics that typify the evolution of SLM, this paper has also introduced relevant external agents. The distinction between internal and external is of course in itself a simplification, as these cannot always easily be kept apart. It is true that what characterizes the uniqueness

⁶The Moors are descendants of Arab, Gujarati and Tamil traders who also follow the Muslim faith.

of SLM is a final act of maintenance that originates within the community: without retention of Malay-derived items, the process of shift towards Lankan grammar would have run its course and the Malay vernacular would have been lost. At the same time, the restructuring of the grammar is led by the typological pressure of languages acquired within the community for sure, but originally belonging to external groups. The more recent stigma associated to the notion of ‘Creole’, though introduced by external agents to the community, was quickly appropriated by community members wanting a shift in language practices. Finally, with the emergence of local linguists who champion the value of SLM originally introduced by external documentarists, the boundaries between external and internal are indeed blurred.

In conclusion, in addition to offering an overview of the socio-historical and linguistic documentation of SLM, we hope to have contributed with the following relevant observations for the practice of documentation and conservation:

- A strong cultural identity is essential for vitality, and is a process of negotiation between ideologies upheld within the community, and ideas projected upon the community from the outside;
- The outside refers not only to the known institutions, including policies, education and economy, but, crucially for us, includes linguists, in the form of both the ‘touch and go’ data collectors as well as the more heavy-handed Language Documentation and Description practitioners. In this sense, we are powerful agents of identity construction processes and the related vitality attached to it;
- The discourse of endangerment as a whole, as it grows and reaches minority groups around the world, becomes an essential measure for linguistic vitality. It has a significant positive impact on communities whose language is in need of revitalization, and this also means it has a powerful role to play in the dynamics of identity construction and identity alignment.

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